

ARIZONA VETERANS' SERVICE ADVISORY COMMISSION
Veterans of Foreign Wars Post #1677
111 E. 2nd Street in Casa Grande, AZ 85222
Saturday – May 13, 2006

M I N U T E S

Call to Order - The meeting was called to order at 10:06 a.m. by Chairman Ellis.

Members Present

Advisory Commission Members

Webb Ellis, Chairperson
Tom Dingwall, Acting Vice Chair
Joe Bibich
Robert Boyd
Linda Fulkerson
Phillip Quochoytewa
Kenneth Yamanouchi

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Gabe Forsberg, Strategic Planner
Lee Borgen, ADVS Vets' Benefit Counselor
Lance Sheldon, ADVS Information Technology

Opening - Minutes of the April 13, 2006 meeting were approved as corrected. The Commissioners introduced themselves and Chairman Ellis asked that the attendees do the same.

Communications

The Commission mailed a letter to the Arizona legislature in support of budget items that benefit veterans. The Director of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services sent out an invitation to all tribes and veterans service organizations to solicit applications to fill vacancies of the Arizona Veterans' Service Advisory Commission (with a deadline of 5/19/06). The Commission received a letter of recommendation for Commissioner Quochoytewa from the American Legion Hopi Post #80. Approximately 120 letters were sent out to invite attendees to the May 12 and May 13 meetings and a letter thanking Ms. Cari James for her assistance with the meeting in Bapchule. A letter was sent to Mr. Hyde Phillips with the San Carlos Veterans Association to supply him with information requested in the February meeting (regarding ceremonial rifles).

Each Commissioner received a letter from Rep. Tom O'Halleran in response to the letter sent to him requesting that the Arizona legislature support the budget as it relates to veterans. Congressman J.D. Hayworth sent his regrets that he was unable to attend today's meeting. Spencer Ralston, Assistant Director of the Tucson VA Medical Center, was unable to attend due to a scheduling problem; but indicated he would be sending a representative on his behalf. Senator John McCain also sent his regrets.

Agency Announcements and Updates

Chairman Ellis provided a brief summary of legislation of interest to veterans this year. While the Commission is completely non-partisan, this is not true of the budget process. In the State of the State address from Governor Janet Napolitano, she committed to fight for veterans' issues. She held true to her word and this legislative session has been one of the most important for Arizona veterans. Veterans' most pressing issues are contained within the Governor's budget:

- Funding construction of a state veteran home in Tucson will cost about \$10.1 million. The number of beds needed for Arizona veterans will essentially double the number of state nursing home beds available.
- There is a serious lack of Veterans Benefits Counselors (VBCs) in the state to serve its 600,000 veterans. The Governor's proposed budget recommends adding 40 VBCs to the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services. The total cost is only about \$2 million out of an approximate \$10 billion state budget.
- A second state veteran cemetery will be built in northern Arizona when a building fund has been reimbursed and the Sierra Vista cemetery receives adequate funding.
- Five veterans' outreach programs (where veterans in rural Arizona will be provided an opportunity to learn about veterans benefits they have earned) will be held outside the major metropolitan areas.

Unfortunately, the Arizona Legislature has seen fit to hold the veterans' issues in the Governor's budget hostage to partisan politics. This must not be allowed to stand. Chairman Ellis urged all attendees to contact their local district representatives and senators and push for their support of the Governor's budget items favoring veterans. Our veterans deserve better.

Strategic Plan Overview

Commissioner Yamanouchi provided background on the strategic plan. The Advisory Commission has divided the state into four regions, assigning each Commissioner to work with veterans in specified counties.

Open Discussion / For the Good of the Order

Issues relating to veterans service organizations:

- Bill Chagnon, VFW Immediate Past Arizona Department Commander, brought up an issue of how the counties assess property tax differently to veterans service organization chapters or posts.
 - Chairman Ellis has assumed responsibility for pursuing the issue by default. The Commission may write letter to the various counties on the subject.
 - David Snider, Pinal County Supervisor, said that there is a state-wide organization of county assessors and that there is also a nation-wide professional organization. He offered his assistance in providing the Advisory Commission contact information.

- One attendee said that his organization's lobbyist in Washington D.C. is not very strong, so his post drafted their position on various issues. As the post was finalizing its resolution, they were instructed by their National Headquarters to stop. They were also asked to discontinue contacting their local congressional delegates.
 - This may be a miscommunication and another attendee offered to work with him to resolve the issue. It is a recognized fact that grassroots efforts are much more effective than leaving all legislative contacts to go through lobbyists.
- One veteran wanted to be notified when the troops return from active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. He believed that this would not only help to recruit members for his organization, it would help these service personnel feel welcomed as they return from theater.
 - While the Privacy Action prohibits the release of individual names, it is possible for organizations to work with the National Guard units (Family Readiness Section) to learn when there are returning troops.
 - There was a suggestion that service organizations approach a National Guard or Reserve unit and "adopt them" so that they develop a relationship. Whether you get recruits or not, you are establishing a local support group for families while their loved ones are on active duty.
 - Commissioner Boyd offered his card to the gentleman making the comment to help him locate a National Guard or Reserve unit .
- Commissioner Yamanouchi said that membership in veterans service organization is an issue of importance nationwide.
 - There have been many different approaches taken by various groups (free membership for the first year, free meals for vets and their significant others at meetings, greeting returning troops, etc.).
 - Younger veterans are hesitant to join and older members are passing away at an alarming rate.
 - A few weeks ago, the ADVS held its first Veterans Expo in Flagstaff. These types of events provide an opportunity for veterans service organizations to set up a table to help recruit members.
- An attendee from the Maricopa VFW Post didn't have trouble finding a location to hold their meetings until recently. He asked if there are opportunities for a low-interest loan to set up a post.
 - Commissioner Boyd offered to help him find a piece of donated land.
 - Commissioner Fulkerson suggested that he approach developers to see if they might make a charitable contribution.
 - Commissioner Bibich suggested that he go to the Planning and Zoning folks to see if developers set aside certain areas for a purpose like a non-profit organization.

Legislation

- One attendee stated that veterans don't mind spending the extra \$25 for the vehicle license the first year, but they believe that \$8 for every year thereafter should go to the Veterans Donation Fund, rather than to the Motor Vehicle Division of the Dept. of Transportation.

- Joe Bibich said that when he was on the Task Force, there was discussion about helping the dependents of casualties receive an education. There was a bill introduced to provide tuition waivers to killed service personnel during the current session, but its status is not known. He is interested in following up on this issue himself.

VA and troops transitioning to civilian status:

- Mark DeArman, Enrollment Coordinator - OIF/OEF¹ with the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System was asked to make a short presentation. Many of the returning service personnel do not register within the first two years post deployment, in spite of various claims that the service personnel are urged to do so. It is important to the service member receive care within this two-year window so that they have a basis for future VA claims. The Tucson VA has approximately 1500 veterans who have returned from an assignment in a hostile environment at this time.
 - The Tucson VA works with retirees and with spouses of veterans
 - CHAMPVA members are also able to use the VA Medical Center.
 - There is a women's clinic in Tucson and in Casa Grande.
 - A VFW member said that the Tucson VA has done an excellent job informing vets and their families about TriCare for Life and other benefits.
 - Even defining the term "veteran" can be very difficult, because of the complex and ever-changing regulations that deal with the benefits available to service personnel
 - Mr. DeArman felt that it was very important to meet with the troops before they are deployed, so they know what to expect upon their return.
- Chairman Ellis said that there is a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that is being finalized now by the VA Regional Office. It is essentially a contract with the National Guard and various other organizations and is a critical first step in providing the VA Regional Office the names and units of returning Guard personnel.
 - The Phoenix VA Medical Center can arrange to open clinics on weekends to make it easier for the returning troops.
 - After the Guard's MOU has been in place, the VA Regional Office wants to develop a similar MOU for the Reserves.
 - General Maxon stated in a Veterans Task Force meeting that the returning troops will be allowed to see physicians at the VA on paid status. State employees who are Guard personnel, must use vacation time in order to go to their medical appointments. Gabe Forsberg will research the issue and report back to Bill Chagnon from the VFW.
- One question raised dealt with returning service personnel receiving college credit for their experience in the military.
 - There is a program being developed now that will advise service personnel what college credit that they can receive as a result of their military service (starting with basic training and all military specialty training).
 - Every active duty Navy station has a program that provides this type of information to service personnel (Sailor Marine American Council On Education Registry Transcript (Smart). While it is available to all Navy personnel, the installation commanders may not all push to get the

¹ Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom.

information out to their junior personnel. Each branch has some form of this program to provide advice to service personnel.

- Individual states and educational institutions do not consistently translate military experience to college credit – from the community college to the university level. The ADVS Office of Education is working on this issue now.
- Active duty personnel in Arizona go through a rather extensive Transition Assistance Program (TAP), where they learn about programs that ease their transition to civilian life. Not all military installations provide this level of support, however.
- In California, there is a program that allows honorably discharged NCOs who were medics to sit for an RN examination. Many of them can pass the examination immediately and become licensed RNs in California. Those who don't pass are provided a letter that suggests training in specific areas where they are weak. After taking the required classes, the discharged NCO is invited to re-test for licensure.
 - One attendee asked about how active duty personnel with law enforcement training transition into civilian careers.
 - Commissioner Boyd said that the Dept. of Corrections is always hungry to recruit veterans.
 - Commissioner Bibich said that even if the veteran does not have a law enforcement background, the Sheriff's Office and local police departments actively pursue veterans because of their work ethic.
 - In general, Commissioner Yamanouchi said that the military applicants are very highly valued as employees. He has actually seen private sector personnel going to active duty stations to actively recruit (strongly suggesting that the military personnel leave active duty sooner before retirement).
 - Commissioner Yamanouchi offered to research the RN exam issue and report back to the Advisory Commission.
 - One attendee suggested that Commissioner Yamanouchi call Mike Espinosa, Director of the US Department of Labor – Veterans' Employment and Training.

Commissioner Yamanouchi read from his notes those individuals who are responsible for taking actions on issues discussed during the meeting.

Adjournment – Meeting adjourned at 11:53 p.m. by acclamation. The next regular meeting will be held at 10:00 a.m. on Thursday, June 8, 2006, at the Arizona State Veteran Home, located at 4141 N. Third Street, Phoenix, AZ 85012.